



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The Face-Off in Doklam: Interpreting India-China Relations

The recent standoff between India and China on the Doklam plateau was the latest in an increasingly long history of conflict and unease along the nearly 2,500-mile border which has strained relations. Although the latest incursion by Chinese forces occurred in the Doklam region along Bhutan's border with China, and not the Sino-Indian border, Indian personnel responded in kind to back up their Bhutanese neighbors.

What is the background to this dispute and what does its disposition tell us about the state of India-China relations? Former Indian Foreign Secretary and diplomat Nirupama Rao recently delivered remarks at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies giving her insights on these questions.

Historical Divisions

Ambassador Rao began her remarks explaining in detail the complex and largely unsettled Sino-Indian border region. Historical circumstances have complicated the managing of border disputes as some disagreements arise out of past treaties and conventions. Other standoffs arose out of China's increasingly aggressive approach in demonstrating sovereignty claims along its periphery.

Following the annexation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China in 1950, the Chinese government sought to solidify its hold in the southwestern province. In order to gain more access to the remote Tibet region, Chinese personnel entered the disputed Aksai Chin territory in the Western Sector of the Sino-Indian border and constructed a road between Xinjiang province and Tibet. An Indian patrol reconnoitering the construction project was arrested by Chinese personnel. Growing disputes on the border culminated in the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The brief but intense war ended in stalemate, and the so called Aksai Chin Highway remains buffered by Chinese PLA forces to the present day. Transgressions by the Chinese have continuously occurred in the Western Sector of the border.

Beyond Aksai Chin, other segments of the Sino-Indian border's western sector are fraught with discord, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. Most recently, segments of Pakistan occupied Kashmir have witnessed renewed strategic importance due to China's Sino-Pakistan economic corridor which is part of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative. India contests that the Sino-Indian border begins near Afghanistan, however today's line of actual control lies further east. The region continues to be a source of concern for India, as China's support for Pakistani development threatens to further solidify Pakistan's control over areas of disputed Kashmir. Lying slightly southeast of Kashmir, the Himachal Pradesh/Uttarakhand -Tibet border composes the middle sector of the border. Ambassador Rao explained that this segment of border is the least complicated and experiences the fewest instances of disagreement.

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East of Nepal lies the Sikkim sector of the border. Flanked on either side by the sovereign states of Nepal and Bhutan, Ambassador Rao explained that this border has a defined character under the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890. Signed during the period of British rule over India, the Chinese government accepts this Convention and the border remains relatively quiet. This stretch of border is well suited to act as the "China-India Economic Corridor" with border trade flows of goods. The recent standoff in Doklam occurred just to the east of the Sikkim border.

The final stretch of border between China and India lies in India's Arunachal Pradesh State. China disputes the legality of the border in this region, yet the area remains mostly peaceful, Ambassador Rao noted. This is due to concerted effort by both India and China to manage disputes through regular meetings of border personnel and confidence-building measures (CBMs).

Renewed Tension in Doklam

Ambassador Rao made note of the strong bilateral relationship between India and neighboring Bhutan, calling it in many ways a "model relationship." Following China's adoption of communism and its incorporation of Tibet, Bhutan distanced itself from its northern neighbor. Today, India and Bhutan enjoy strong political, development, economic, and military relations. India encouraged Bhutan's joining of the UN and the country has also established diplomatic relations with a number of other states. Militarily, without an air force, Bhutan relies on Indian air support. Conversely, Bhutan opts not to maintain official relations with China, although there are ongoing border talks between the two countries. Since 1984, twenty-four rounds of talks have occurred between Bhutan and China over their disputed border with no clear solution generated.

The standoff in Bhutan's disputed Doklam region this summer occurred near the tri-junction of India, China, and Bhutan, and just east of the Sikkim border. Doklam also lies close to the Indian Siliguri Pass, or "Chicken's Neck" in the northeast region of the country. This narrow region, flanked on two sides by Bangladesh and Nepal, is the only land access to India's northeast. Chinese incursions so close to this area provoke a strategic threat to India as well as Bhutan, the Ambassador noted.

The incursion began in mid-June of 2017 when PLA personnel entered the disputed territory and began construction of a road. Bhutanese security forces requested their withdrawal from the disputed land, and India subsequently responded by sending troops to backup Bhutan's position. Although no loss of life occurred, Ambassador Rao asserted that there could have been a more intense military flare-up. The last loss of life in the Sino-Indian border area occurred during a 1975 Chinese ambush near a border pass in Arunachal Pradesh, she said.

Ambassador Rao explained how Chinese incursions tends to

occur gradually as China attempts to slowly change the status quo of the disputed territory. Often grazers are accompanied by Chinese PLA security forces and later semi-permanent structures are left. These incursions serve to push China's narrative of their interpretation of the border. The latest incursion in Doklam appeared more brazen than other recent actions. Chinese mass media served up fiery rhetoric around the dispute and were dismissive of Indian complaints.

Tensions were partly diffused when disengagement took place towards the end of August and preceding the 9th BRICS summit held in the Chinese city of Xiamen. There was speculation that China removed security forces from the region for fear that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi could boycott the summit. Although the situation has cooled since the summer months, Ambassador Rao explained that the India-China border faces constant tension. The seventy-one day engagement is proof of the need for concerted diplomatic communication to prevent such instances.

A Future of Potential but Uncertainty

The insistent border disputes have not dampened Sino-Indian trade relations and other aspects of the bilateral relationship, the Ambassador pointed out. China is India's largest trade partner in goods. China is also a major investor in Indian energy and telecoms projects. Approximately 13,000 Indian students currently study abroad in Chinese schools and universities, many studying medicine. If India's border dispute with China were to find a more permanent solution, the region holds great potential in becoming India's own economic corridor with China. The Ambassador remarked that areas of functional cooperation could be used to find more modus vivendi solutions to border disputes.

Ambassador Rao also expressed the need for India to maintain strong relationships with its neighbors like Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. She argued that by virtue of its being the largest country in South Asia, its strategic, political and economic strength, and through geography, India has the political, economic, and cultural clout to compete with large Chinese investment in these countries. As China continues to expand its land and naval presence, it is also important for India to reinforce the partnership with the United States. Ambassador Rao closed with the need for more mutual understanding between India and China.

The bilateral relationship cannot sustain constant confrontation. It has acquired ballast in many other areas making it much more diversified and evolved.

She hopes more constant contact, and communication, could become the norm in handling border disputes.

Ambassador Nirupama Rao served as India's Foreign Secretary from 2009 to 2011. She was also India's Ambassador to the United States, China, and Sri Lanka during her career. She was the second woman to hold the post of Foreign Secretary and the first woman spokesperson for India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ambassador Rao delivered remarks at the Sigur Center on September 13, 2017.

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